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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a silent film made by the author which illustrates various French gestures. The format is Super 8, and the film lasts five minutes. The script is given, along with an English translation. The story concerns several French students at an outdoor cafe wondering about one of their friends. The conversation includes 10 typical French gestures, including those showing amazement, disbelief, power, greetings, and drinking. All 10 gestures are described in this paper, as well as incidental aspects of French culture which appear in the film. The pedagogical applications of the film follow its description. Several ideas for projects similar to this one are proposed. These include presentations using several different media to be made both abroad and at home. Emphasis is placed on involving students in the work. The paper concludes with a statement of the importance of studying nonverbal communication. (Author/AM)

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A Mini-Film on French Kinesics

Presentation Made to the I.U.-Bloomington Conference on Foreign Languages, Bloomington, Indiana, February 22, 1975

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A Mini-Film on French Kinesics

by Joel Walz

ABSTRACT

This paper was presented at the I.U.-Bloomington Conference on Foreign Languages on February 22, 1975. It describes a silent film made by the author which illustrates various French gestures. The format is Super 8, and the film lasts five minutes. The script is given, along with an English translation. The story concerns several French students at an outdoor café wondering about one of their friends. The conversation includes ten typical French gestures, including those showing amazement, disbelief, power, greetings and drinking. All ten gestures are described in this paper, as well as incidental aspects of French culture which appear in the film.

The pedagogical applications of the film follow its description. Several ideas for projects similar to this one are proposed. These include presentations using several different media to be made both abroad and at home. Emphasis is placed on involving students in the work. The paper concludes with a statement of the importance of studying non-verbal communication.

The purpose of this paper is to describe the pedagogical applications of a film entitled "Un après-midi au café" which I made in France in 1972. The subject is kinesics, which is non-verbal communication, or simply body language. Anyone who has communicated with a native speaker of French or merely seen one talk can attest to the importance of gestures in carrying on a conversation. Foreign speakers can master the pronunciation and syntax of a language perfectly, but a certain amount of authenticity is lost and misunderstanding is likely without appropriate gestures. While there have been written descriptions of this body language, more explicit representations are needed in order to help teachers supplement regular textbook material with this type of communication. Since many gestures entail movement, film is the best medium for presenting them.

The film I made is short, lasting only about five minutes. This enables a class to concentrate on the subject at hand. It is silent, mainly because of technical limitations. The actors involved were French students who were friends of the author. They acted out a dialog written with a simple story line which permitted as many gestures in as short a time as possible. The film was made at an outdoor café which had the double advantage of being a typical French setting and also providing enough light for easy filming.

The dialog was filmed as subtitles similar to the early

silent movies. When showing the film to lower level classes I usually hand out a printed script in advance to insure that everyone understands. The dialog of the mini-film is as follows:

Un après-midi au café

Quelques étudiants sont assis autour d'une table à un café.
Didier: (au garçon) Deux cafés!
Denyse: Tu as vu Joël, Annick?
Annick: Oui, hier. Il était saoul. Il a bu trois formidables au Père Léon.
Denyse: Trois? Oh la la!
Annick: Oui, je crois. Combien de litres Joël a bu hier soir, Jacquot?
Jacquot: Treize.
Annick: Mon œil! En tout cas il est rentré en Solex.
Didier: Il est fou, ce mec.
Joël arrive en Solex et dit bonjour à tout le monde.
Didier: Joël, tu veux boire un coup?
Joël: Non, merci. (à Denise) On y va?
Tout le monde est sur le point de partir en voiture.
Braham: Ta 2 CV ne vaut pas grand'chose.
Françoise: Tu parles. Ça gaze!

The following translation is a fairly accurate English translation:

An Afternoon at a Café

A few students are seated around a table at a café.
Didier: (to the waiter) Two coffees!
Denyse: Have you seen Joel, Annick?
Annick: Yes, yesterday. He was drunk. He drank three quarts of beer at the Père Léon Café.

Denyse: Three? Wow!
Annick: I think so. How many quarts did Joel drink last night, Jacquot?
Jacquot: Thirteen.
Annick: My eye! Anyway, he went home on his motorbike.
Didier: That guy's crazy.
Joel arrives on his motorbike and says hello to everyone.
Didier: Joel, do you want to get something to drink?
Joel: No, thanks. (to Denyse) Shall we go?
Everyone is about to leave by car.
Braham: Your car isn't worth much, Françoise.
Françoise: Are you kidding? It really takes off!

When presenting the film before a class I usually do not announce its purpose. The dialog is read from the printed page and the film is viewed. The contrast between the American rendition of the class and that of the French actors in the film is quite vivid. Students easily see the importance of kinesics. All my classes have been able to recall the ten gestures in the film without being warned to look for them. The gestures which appear in the film are the following:

1. "Deux cafés" Most Europeans start counting with their thumbs rather than index finger. Thus, to signal "two" one holds up the thumb and index finger.
2. "Il était saoul" To denote drunkenness one makes a fist with the thumb side toward the nose and turns the fist counterclockwise.
3. "Oh la la" Amazement is expressed by shaking a hand rapidly

in front of the chest with a limp wrist.

4. "Mon œil" Disbelief is shown by pulling down a lower eyelid with an index finger.

5. "Il est fou" The gesture indicating that someone is crazy is made by touching the temple with an index finger and twisting the hand.

6. & 7. Arrival of a new person. French greetings are different from those of Americans. Friends of the opposite sex kiss each other on the cheek. This is known as "une bise." They shake hands much more frequently, although in a less forceful manner. They hold less of each other's hand (usually only the fingers) and make one abrupt, up-and-down movement.

8. "boire un coup" While Americans mold their hands around an imaginary glass to suggest drinking, the French imitate the bottle itself. With the fingers clenched in a fist, the thumb is pointed to one's mouth and the head is tilted back.

9. "On y va?" Leaving is suggested by striking the small-finger side of one hand against the back of the wrist of the other hand, which is being flipped upwards slightly. This gesture is also used to show someone else that you would like him to leave.

10. "Ça gaze" Power is expressed by shaking one's clenched fist and forearm horizontally away from the chest in short, rapid strokes. The thumb side of the fist is turned toward

the chest for this gesture.

In addition to gestures, the film points out other aspects of cultural importance. The 2 CV (Deux Chevaux) and Solex are the main sources of transportation for French students. The car is well known to most young Americans now thanks to the movie American Graffiti. There was once a motorized bike in this country called a MoPed which is similar to the Solex. Students also get a good view of an outdoor café from the minifilm. French values and activities are also seen in the film. The student are amazed that someone drank three quarts of beer because teenage drinking is not as prevalent in France as in America.

These are just three incidental aspects of the film which lead to interesting class discussions. It would be almost impossible to make a five-minute film without including some material beyond the main theme which reflects the foreign culture. The mini-film was inexpensive to make; renting a Super 8 camera and buying all the supplies came to less than $20. Finding actors was no problem--everyone wanted to get into the act.

For the teacher who does not care for the slightly contrived nature of a storyline, other projects are possible. One could film natural sequences of native speakers engaged in conversation. The movie would be more expensive in terms of film and would require more cinematic expertise, but the

results would be more authentic and probably more amusing. Another possibility would be to ask French speakers who are adept at acting to improvise a conversation with their own gestures and have students back in the American classroom write the dialog.

For the teacher who feels unqualified for movie-making, a slide show, film strip, or series of still photographs could be created. Although gestures imply motion, their basic representation can be conveyed through still pictures. The value of a slide show and still photographs is that individual pictures can be rearranged, allowing students to write completely different stories or dialogs to go with them. Without even going to Europe teachers and students can shoot--or videotape--their own programs by writing the story and playing the roles themselves. A project which combines a study of French kinesics with American would be particularly valuable. This was accomplished at a Bloomington, Indiana high school by having the students watch television with the sound off. Most of us are inured to the gestures that we make, but careful observation leads to striking discoveries.

The projects suggested above, which develop the ideas expressed in the mini-film, are an excellent way for the teacher to supplement textbooks. Students who are tired of conjugating verbs and filling in the blanks realize that

what they are studying is communication. When people communicate ideas, they use more than words and sentences. Just as it is important to understand these words, it is also necessary to understand the body language that may accompany them. The mini-film described here, along with the projects suggested, have the practical goal of showing this aspect of language and thereby expanding students' awareness of how people communicate.